



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## HABAKKUK

---

REV. T. JOHNSTONE IRVING  
Naples, Italy

---

Criticism has not done much for the book of Habakkuk. It has raised a number of questions; it cannot be said to have answered satisfactorily any of them. The book is very small—a mere scrap. In Hebrew it may be read in half an hour; in English in ten minutes. It is hardly to be believed that a man of Habakkuk's ability and literary power should have written only this. A gift of expression such as his must have gratified itself with larger production. Small as the book is, there are critics who find themselves constrained to believe that much of it is not from the hand of Habakkuk. The third chapter is said to be from another and later hand, and in the other two chapters are verses that are said to be interpolations. It is also said that a number of verses in the first chapter are out of place, and ought to be transferred to a more suitable setting in the second. It would serve no useful purpose for the present writer to add to the arguments that have been used for and against these assertions. Anyone who defends the positions that the entire book is Habakkuk's, and that the order of our text is the original one, will find himself in remarkably good company.

The date of the book can be determined only approximately. When it was written the Chaldaeans had succeeded the Assyrians in the overlordship of the Asiatic world, and in their characteristic way were actively engaged in making their power felt. They had not yet reached Judah. As described by the prophet, they were still at a distance. Now Nineveh fell about 608 B. C., and Jerusalem was taken by Nebuchadrezzar in 586: at some point, therefore, between these two dates the prophecy appeared. This, as has been said, is somewhat indefinite; but to be able to fix within limits so narrow the birthday of a piece of writing between two and three thousand years old leaves little ground for complaint.

The text of the prophecy is in a number of places doubtful, and in

several certainly corrupt. A clause of the ninth verse of the third chapter is said to have been translated in a hundred different ways; which means, of course, that it cannot be translated at all. Several other clauses are in like case. Our English versions translate them all; but to translate everything is the principle on which they proceed. To render the unintelligible by the unintelligible can hardly be called a common-sense proceeding. It would be better and more honest to put asterisks where the nonsense at present stands. Fortunately the imperfections of the text hardly injure at all the intelligibility of the prophecy as a whole, and are inappreciable, as far as its practical usefulness is concerned.

All critics praise Habakkuk's style. This is usually done in general terms. It may be worth while to enter somewhat into detail. Someone has said, "the style is the man," and if this is true, Habakkuk is an exceptionally interesting individual. Professor Masson of Edinburgh University used to say to his students that if they wrote anything descriptive, an indispensable condition of success was to keep their eye on the object described. Naturally he meant the eye of the mind—"that inward eye which," as Wordsworth says, "is the bliss of solitude." Habakkuk both himself sees and makes others see. Many of his sentences, nay clauses, nay individual words, are pictures. They could be painted. There is about his writing a nervous brevity and vivid picturesqueness that it would be difficult to match. Let anyone read the original with care, and honestly endeavor to pair the Hebrew words with English, and he will find picture after picture of the most fascinating kind rise before his mind. Isaiah, in a crisis similar to that in which Habakkuk found himself, says: "I will wait upon the Lord, that hideth his face from the house of Jacob, and I will look for him." That is prose. Habakkuk says: "I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon a tower, and will look forth to see what he will speak to me." Here we have poetry and a picture. We see the prophet on his height eagerly peering forth like a temple watchman scanning the horizon to catch the first indications of dawn. The description of the Chaldeans is, of course, largely imaginative; but how brilliant was the imagination that produced it! "His horses are swifter than leopards." One sees the lithe greyhound-like bound of the creatures. "And fiercer than

evening wolves." One sees the brutes with the hunger of the day on them fiercely foraging for a supper. "His horseman gallop. They come from afar." The meaning is that their advance is by forced marches; before night the camping-ground they left in the morning is on the sky line far behind them. It is a pity our translators allowed themselves to be influenced so little by the animation of the original. A monotonous level of propriety is what they seem to have aimed at. Notice how effective the anticipative pronoun is in the following: "He! at Kings he scoffs, and princes are his derision; he! at every stronghold he laughs: he heaps up earthmounds and takes it. . . . He scoffs: he laughs." One can hear the boisterous exulting ha, ha, ha! Then notice what follows the verse I have translated. "Then he sweeps on like a blast; and passes through"—is there in no time—"and becomes guilty." The taking of a stronghold is a mere episode, hardly delaying at all the headlong rush, and how dreadful is that "becomes guilty!" What a swift darting aside of the mind! There is a whole tragedy in the words. It is true there are critics who question the correctness of the text; but I prefer to regard the expression as just the kind of grand thing that Habakkuk was capable of saying. The above may suffice to indicate what I mean by the picturesqueness of Habakkuk's style; and I make no apology for dwelling on it. It is an element, and a most interesting one, in this precious morsel of scripture. Let no one, however, suppose that I intend it to be understood that the prophet set himself to produce a piece of fine writing. Nothing of the kind. It is probable his style gave him no concern. His concern was to get expressed the thoughts that were in him. Juvenal says: *Indignatio facit versus*, "Indignation makes verses;" and it was the moral passion in the heart of Habakkuk, burning like a fire in his bones, that, combined with the peculiar cast of his mind, made his style what it is.

Habakkuk's prophecy consists of two moral problems and a psalm. In the problems we see faith in a state of conflict; in the psalm we see it grandly triumphant. Through conflict to victory—how often is that the history of faith! Thus was it with Job's faith; thus with that of Thomas. Habakkuk's first problem is contained in the first four verses of the first chapter. It is not just easy to

decide whether the evil spoken of in these verses is that practiced by the godless in Israel against the godly, or whether it is inflicted by a foreign foe. Upon the whole the former seems the more probable. "And there is strife, and contention riseth up" are words that describe domestic trouble more fitly than foreign. Now, we have in these verses wickedness, the prophet, and God; and the prophet's problem was to understand how God's attitude toward wickedness could be so different from his own. How was it that God could tolerate what he found so intolerable? "How long, O Jehovah, have I called, and thou hearest not: I cry unto thee 'violence,' and thou helpst not. Why dost thou cause me to see wickedness? and why dost thou look upon grievance? and spoiling and violence are before me: and there is strife and contention riseth up." Shall we say that we have here God's patience, and the prophet's impatience? However that may be, the prophet proceeds on these two assumptions: first, that God's feeling toward wickedness ought to be the same as his; and, second that God's action in regard to wickedness ought to correspond with what he regards as necessary. We have here a situation of extreme interest. The prophet virtually compares his own attitude toward moral evil with that of God. He finds the two do not harmonize; and his inference, even if not actually expressed, is that right is on his side rather than on God's. We should err, however, were we to make too much of this want of accord between the prophet and God. It is more in appearance than in reality that there is conflict. It is just because Habakkuk is so devotedly on God's side that the misunderstanding between him and God has arisen. Habakkuk, like all the prophets, has a passion for righteousness; and when a human being and God confer together on this great matter we may be sure the difference between them is not radical. And yet the difference between Habakkuk and God *is* important. As a sinner I am entirely on God's side. It comforts me to hear the prophet expostulate with God, and ask: "how long?" I am made to realize that the evildoers were more to God than they were to Habakkuk: and that in God feelings, deeper than the prophet could fathom, stayed his avenging hand. I am reminded of God's remonstrance with another impatient prophet. "Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not labored, neither madest

it grow; which came up in a night; and perished in a night: and should not I spare Nineveh, that great city; wherein are more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left; and also much cattle?"

It was to Habakkuk a grievous consequence of the evil of his time that the law was torpid, and justice never made headway. These expressions may just be another way of saying that the time was evil. A time certainly is evil when law and justice are in the condition here described. But the expressions may have a more pathetic meaning. They may indicate the prophet's sense of the futility of his own efforts to reform the time. Law and justice have in the prophet's mind become endowed with personality. They are agents with a work assigned them; but so intractable is the material to be worked on, that the one has become chilled to the heart; and the other has been brought to a standstill through sheer inability to get forward. One suspects that this is just the prophet's indirect way of expressing how it is with himself. It is in his heart the chill is; it is his efforts at reform that have met with utter frustration. As God's prophet it was his function to make law and justice prevail: but he has labored in vain: he has spent his strength for naught and in vain. What laborer in God's vineyard has not experienced this chill of heart, and sense of utter frustration? Does he not at times question whether his work can be credited with anything deserving the name of success? What profit have I, he may ask himself, of all my labor under the sun? Well, a feeling of this kind may not be without a wholesome use; but the sooner it is got rid of the better; and there is no better way of dealing with it than to follow Habakkuk's example. Take God into confidence about it. The disheartened worker has no surer means of regaining courage and renewing strength than by pouring out his complaint before God. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength."

Habakkuk's first problem met with a solution. The Chaldaeans were advancing; and for judgment God had appointed them, and for chastisement he had founded them. They were God's chosen instrument for the correction of his disobedient people. How Habakkuk reached the conviction that the Chaldaeans would be made to serve this purpose it may not be easy to say. His own account of

the matter is that it was produced in him by God; and this explanation is perhaps sufficient: When the hand of God is on a man it may not be possible to give a natural history of his moral intuitions. God is said to *reveal* his secret to his servants the prophets.

We have now reached the circumstances out of which Habakkuk's second problem arose: and the section of the prophecy that states and solves it is in some ways the most interesting and instructive part of the book. It is out of the solution of the first problem that the second arrives. The Chaldaeans were raised up to punish sinful Israel: but how inexpressibly dreadful and morally horrible is this instrument of God's! The Chaldaeans were destined to be a whip; they are proving themselves to be a devastating scourge. It may have been necessary for God to raise them up: surely there is even a greater necessity to put them down. It was their function to punish wickedness; what punishment shall be meted out to them for their own far greater wickedness? This was the "plea" for an answer to which the prophet betook himself to his tower.

The Chaldaeans exercise on Habakkuk a kind of fascination. We may use a word recently come into use and say he is obsessed by them. His whole nature—intellect, feeling, imagination, conscience—is occupied with them. He forgets altogether his own people and their sin, and is wholly absorbed in the contemplation of this awful nation. The expressions he makes use of to describe their activity in its moral aspects are of extreme interest. For brevity they are such as only a master of phrase could strike out; as moral pronouncements they smite like a sledge-hammer. "He marcheth through the breadths of the earth to possess dwellings that are not his." Might makes right. Here we have unscrupulous greed, greed all the more appalling, because backed by irresistible might, greed that is hardly in alliance with covetousness, because it is so sure of gratification. "From himself proceed his judgment and his predominance." The literal rendering of these words conveys very imperfectly their meaning. "From himself," that is, self-derived, "is his judgment," that is, the imposition of his will on others. And self-derived is "his predominance." The whole may be expressed thus: "He is self-willed and irresponsibly overbearing." In his dealings with others there is no reference to a Higher than both he and they. Conscience he can

hardly be said to possess, because he acknowledges no lord of conscience. "Whose might is his God." This was the ultimate word required to complete the prophet's conception of the Chaldaean, and here we have it. The foregoing expressions lead up to this; those that follow are deductions from this. The expression strikes me as one of great originality. I can think of nothing in the Old Testament like it. We read, indeed, that the fool has said in his heart there is no god; but it is not said that the fool has found a substitute for God. The Chaldaean, then, is his own God, and the God of all on earth besides; and what a merciless omnipotent he is! His fellow-men are hardly human beings; they are lower animals, rather. They are fish! "He taketh up all of them with his angle, he sweepeth them into his net, and gathereth them into his drag." As an example of sarcasm expressing moral indignation what could surpass the following? "Therefore he sacrificeth to his net, and burneth incense to his drag; because by them his portion is fat, and his provision rich." There are commentators who take these expressions literally: but surely they ought to pray for more light! How touching is the following, interjected in the midst of the description of the Chaldaeans: "Art not thou from of old, Jehovah, my God, my holy one? We shall not die." Critics say the reading ought to be: "thou shalt not die;" but, as it seems to me, with a strange failure to appreciate the situation. With so dire a foe menacing, that the prophet and his people should die seemed inevitable. But somehow, oh, somehow! the eternal God would work deliverance.

The Chaldaean, as presented to us by Habakkuk, is a portentous phenomenon. The whole representation may be summed up in the words, "Godless might." One wonders whether if the prophet lived in our day he would find anything to correspond. Most ages have their Chaldaeans. In one age he takes one form; in another, another. Does he exist in the world today, and if so, what form has he assumed? Men may agree that he exists, but differ as to his form. I can imagine a good case being made out that the world's *militarism* is our Chaldaean. It might be objected that the expression, "godless might," is too strong to be applied to this evil. I am not convinced. It seems to me that men will never protest against, and agitate against, militarism with adequate earnestness till they are



convinced that it is godless. A master of legions in our day has boasted that he is in alliance with the Almighty. One would like to see the predominant partner's signature to that alliance. Our conception of what is godly is derived from Christ; and anything more alien from his teaching than the warlike condition of Europe today, and the conditions of the people consequent on military expenditure, it would be impossible to imagine. I live in Italy, and see her people leaving her by the hundred thousand annually, because the conditions of life are such as can no longer be borne. The taxes absorb so much of their scanty earnings, that what is left does not suffice to meet the most elementary needs. Bloated armaments, as they are called, are undoubtedly a clamant evil of our time. Another, and of a type morally lower, is greed of money. This is one of the lowest of human passions, and when it has grown strong through gratification, one of the most merciless. Let our slum-dwellings, sweated industries, adulterated food, and "corners" in this and the other commodity bear witness. Virgil speaks of *sacra fames auri*: "accursed hunger for gold;" and his words are not too strong. My own conviction is that in this evil we have, if not our only Chaldaean, at any rate our worst. So formidable has the evil become in some of its developments that statesmen of the humaner sort have their minds occupied about it, and it is probable that some sort of legislative curb will be applied. One knows, of course, the kind of plea it will urge to be let alone—freedom of contract; the right of unfettered trading, and so on. It may be enough to answer *summum jus, summa injuria*: "limitless right, limitless wrong." When we are allowed to define and prosecute our own rights, the rights of other people are like to be a vanishing quantity. In our day it has become a distinguished virtue to have the courage to be poor; and there is probably no more immediate duty before the godly than to show by their own way of living that a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things that he possesseth. But it is time to proceed to the solution of Habakkuk's second problem.

With the Chaldaean as described by the prophet before our mind we are in a position to understand the urgency of the problem. It must have been in a kind of agony that Habakkuk looked forth from his watch-tower. How long he had to remain in his attitude of expect-

ancy we are not told; probably it was for some time. Now, the instructions given to Habakkuk to prepare him for the vision to be granted seem to me of striking significance. Commentators, I find, in their haste to reach the vision itself, pass them by as of no particular importance. In this they greatly err. Let me translate the instructions. "And Jehovah answered me and said: 'Write the vision, and make it plain upon the tablets, that he may run that reads it. For the vision is still for an appointed time, and it panted to reach its destination, and will not lie: if it tarry wait for it; for it will certainly come; it will not be behindhand.'" The vision is to be written so plainly that it may be read and understood with the utmost ease—"that he may run that reads it." This means that it is intended for all sorts and conditions of men—for the race in fact—and no obstruction is to be allowed to stand in the way of its being easily apprehended. The relevancy of the rest of the instructions is not so easily grasped. Had it been a divine deed of punishment, or a divine work of retribution that God was about to announce to the prophet, there would have been no difficulty. A deed or a work has an appointed time, which it will not fail to keep, and must, of course, be waited for. But it is not a deed or a work that God is about to announce, but a moral maxim. Why, then, must it be waited for? Why may it not be announced at once? Why should it be represented as panting to reach its destination? To those questions there is only one possible answer. The moral maxim cannot be announced till minds are in an appropriate condition to receive it. I think there can be no doubt that we are meant to understand that it is the prophet's mind that is not yet fit to be a habitat for the promised truth. Habakkuk has been too peremptory with God. His crying, and expostulation, and outlook from his tower, indicate, of course, extreme earnestness; but they indicate at the same time great impatience; and there is a suggestion that God's concern for the moral well-being of the world does not equal his. This is not the temper of mind to which God can communicate his secret. Such a mind has still to wait; and everything depends on the character of the waiting. It must be patient, trustful, hopeful. How true it is that through the discipline of life we learn God's lessons. *Solvitur ambulando*: through living the problems of life find solution. The young are much more afflicted with problems

than the old; not, that the old have solved all theirs, but somehow they have got beyond them. They have shed them with many other juvenilities. Habakkuk's last word to us is that God has made him to walk upon his high places. He is now higher than his watch-tower. Beneath him is the fog of the world, and it is in the fog that problems are encountered.

Habakkuk, then, waited, and at last moral fitness came, and God's great vision was given. I call the vision great, because it is the final word on the punishment of sin and the reward of righteousness. Let us endeavor to understand it as thoroughly as we may. The Revised Version translates the first half of the verse as follows: "Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright in him." For "upright" we read in the margin, "straight." This is an attempt to make the translation more nearly literal. To express "righteous" we use a word meaning straight vertically—upright; the Hebrew used one meaning straight horizontally. It may be helpful to give a more literal rendering of the word translated "puffed up." This word is a verb in the intensive form, derived from a noun meaning a hill or ridge, and the literal meaning is "to be hilly or ridgy." The literal translation of the whole clause will, therefore, be: "His soul is ridgy, it is not straight (or level) in him." But when a soul is said to have ridges it is implied that these ridges are not stable, but in motion. That this inference is legitimate may, I think be proved by the fact that the chief word in the second half of the verse is one meaning "steadfastness." As so often in Hebrew, there is a contrast between the first half of the verse and the second. Now, to translate the idea of ridges in motion we have a capital word, viz., "billowy;" and when we pass from the literal to the metaphorical, and apply the idea to a soul, we have no better word to express the meaning than "tumultuous." The clause may, then, be translated thus: "His soul is tumultuous, it is not calm in him." That Habakkuk had the raging sea before his mind's eye when he wrote these words I have no doubt. In fact his meaning is admirably expressed in the words of another prophet: "The wicked are like the troubled sea which cannot rest; whose waters cast up mire and dirt;" or as Jude has it: "Raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame." In contrast with this tumultuous instability we have the second half of the verse: "The

just shall live by his steadfastness, or faithfulness." St. Paul adopts the Septuagint translation: "The just shall live by faith." It would be rash to assume that the apostle did not know the original. One can imagine him thanking God for this variation from the original. The apostle knew what he was about. What he does, in fact, is simply to go a step farther back—to go beyond the effect to the cause. There can be no faithfulness without faith. Faithfulness is just faith in activity. We now see the meaning of Habakkuk's vision. Sin is tumult—the negation of peace. "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked." Faithfulness—which I take to be equivalent to the New Testament's "patient continuance in well-doing"—is life, in the pregnant sense of that word. And now it is seen how complete is God's answer to Habakkuk's "plea," and how mistaken he was in supposing that God can ever be indifferent to sin. The prophet demanded from God what we may call some kind of arbitrary punishment for sin—for the sin of his own people, the Chaldaean, and for the Chaldaean's sin some other great power as avenger. This is very superficial, and the prophet was made to see that it was. He was taught that sin is its own worst punishment, and faithfulness its own best reward. That this is so is by God's appointment. God has constituted man so that "the mind is its own peace, and of itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven." Habakkuk thoroughly learned God's lesson. If we study carefully his five "woes" invoked on the Chaldaeans, we shall find that each of them is an exemplification of God's vision. In them there is no arbitrary punishment; but only that which we may call necessary—the inevitable consequence of the course of life pursued. Let us not fail to notice the grand words with which the prophet, having learned his lesson, stills his own and all other caviling against God: "God is in his holy temple: hush before him all the earth!"